

College admissions scandal in the US: An inevitable product of malignant levels of social inequality

By David Walsh
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The United States Attorney's Office in Massachusetts announced April 8 that fourteen individuals, thirteen parents and one college tennis coach, had agreed to plead guilty to charges related to the college admissions scandal that came to light a month ago.

The parents, including actress Felicity Huffman, have admitted "to using bribery and other forms of fraud to facilitate their children's admission to selective colleges and universities. One coach also agreed to plead guilty," according to the US Attorney's Office. The defendants pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy to commit mail fraud and honest services mail fraud.

The thirteen parents were arrested last month and charged with conspiring with William "Rick" Singer of Newport Beach, California to secure the admission of students to elite colleges and universities.

Numerous others arrested in March, including actress Lori Loughlin, have not yet reached agreements with federal prosecutors. A federal grand jury on April 9 indicted 16 parents who refused to accept the deal with money laundering charges, which carry a maximum of 20 years in prison. The differing amounts of money involved are clearly a factor. Huffman acknowledged making a \$15,000 payment to Singer's Key Worldwide Foundation, a fake charity, to improve her daughter's SAT scores. Loughlin and her husband, Massimo Giannulli, are alleged to have paid \$500,000 to facilitate their two daughters' entry into the University of Southern California.

In a statement, Huffman, the wife of actor William H. Macy, said, "I am ashamed of the pain I have caused my daughter, my family, my friends, my colleagues and the educational community. I want to apologize to them and, especially, I want to apologize to the students who work hard every day to get into college, and to their parents who make tremendous sacrifices to support their children and do so honestly." She added, "This transgression ... I will carry for the rest of my life."

There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of Huffman's apology, but neither her statement nor the vast majority of the media coverage with which the public has been deluged helps explain the social, economic and moral climate that made the corruption scandal not only possible, but even inevitable.

This corrupt process is the implementation, in this particular field, of the "aristocratic principle," the domination of the

plutocracy at the expense of every other social interest or concern.

Most fundamentally, in a society dominated—indeed thoroughly blighted and disfigured—by economic inequality, how could a truly "level playing field" possibly be maintained in any important sphere of life? The rich in America, awash with unimaginable quantities of money, live in a separate universe from the rest of the population, and consider themselves—as the feudal nobility once did—above the law or a law unto themselves. What in the world would prevent them from extending that attitude toward the education and careers of their offspring? Legal and moral barriers seem irrelevant to such people, even vaguely laughable. Why shouldn't they be able to use their riches to obtain anything they want? What else is it for?

Of course, in capitalist America college admissions has always been *legally* tilted in favor of the wealthy, a process that has only been further aggravated in recent years. A study by The Equality of Opportunity Project in 2017 (one of whose co-authors was Emmanuel Saez, Professor of Economics, University of California, Berkeley), the *New York Times* summarized, found that "Students at elite colleges are even richer than experts realized ... At 38 colleges in America, including five in the Ivy League—Dartmouth, Princeton, Yale, Penn and Brown—more students came from the top 1 percent of the income scale than from the entire bottom 60 percent."

"Roughly one in four of the richest students," the *Times* reported, "attend an elite college—universities that typically cluster toward the top of annual rankings. ... In contrast, less than one-half of 1 percent of children from the bottom fifth of American families attend an elite college; less than half attend any college at all."

Inside Higher Ed recently observed that at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, "which enrolls some of the wealthiest students in the country, there doesn't appear to be a solid wall separating admissions operations from development operations. The university allowed its fund-raising office to set up campus tours and meetings with faculty members for applicants whose parents are Brown alumni, or who are related to wealthy individuals or others that have relationships with university fund-raisers. In some cases, the faculty members were encouraged to write letters to the admissions office about their (positive) impressions of the applicants."

The benefits accruing to affluent families make themselves felt at every stage of the process. An AFP story notes that “the rich have a huge, unfair advantage when it comes to gaming the intensely stressful annual college admissions battle. ... The process favors the wealthy. They can apply to more schools and invest heavily in preparing for tests and essays. The richest, too, can beat the competition by donating to universities. ...

“The process begins in earnest in tenth grade, three years before graduating from high school. Students prepare for and take multiple times the ACT and SAT entrance examinations ... There are essays to write, interviews, tutorials, preparation tests, and for the families with access and connections, direct lobbying. ...

“According to the Independent Educational Consultants Association, parents pay on average \$200 an hour to consult experts on the applications process. But that price, in some situations, can run into the thousands of dollars per hour.” The parents of children assisted by a “coaching company” named in the AFP article “pay on average \$40,000.”

It is no accident that six of the thirteen parents pleading guilty were “entrepreneurs,” according to *Inc.*: “Jane Buckingham is the founder and president of Trendera, a boutique marketing firm that works with companies like Gap, Target, Condé Nast, and HBO. Peter Jan Sartorio founded PJ’s Organics, which sells frozen burritos. Gregory Abbott is the founder and chairman of International Dispensing Corporation, a New York City-based food and beverage distribution and packaging company.... Robert Flaxman is the founder and CEO of Irvine, California-based Crown Realty & Development. Marjorie Klapper co-founded M&M Bling, a fine jewelry boutique store in Menlo Park, California. Devin Sloane is the founder and CEO of WaterTalent, a drinking- and wastewater systems compliance firm.” Collectively, the six paid more than half a million dollars to Singer as part of the illegal scheme.

Cheating to get ahead, or to get one’s children ahead, goes with the unequal social territory in the US. But more than merely getting “a leg up” economically, much less intellectually, is involved. After all, as various commentators have observed, the young people involved (not necessarily through any fault of their own) in the current scandal were more or less guaranteed lives of leisure by their parents’ immense wealth.

A psychological component is also present, which speaks to the current benighted state of American society. Having a son or daughter at a prestigious college or university is also a status symbol, a further marker of success, to go along with—or perhaps make up for?—the ill-gotten gains made on the stock market or in some socially indispensable profession such as selling frozen burritos, real estate development or purveying “fine jewelry.” The rich in America at present *desperately* need to live in the appropriate neighborhood, drive the appropriate automobile and send their children to the appropriate institutions. It’s all part of the same miserable, repellent package.

The rotten atmosphere reaches into the cultural world, certainly the “movie business.” There is every reason to reject organizing a lynch-mob against Huffman and company, but it certainly does not speak well about the prevailing mood in Hollywood. These people are not role models.

Huffman is a talented actor, and the highly-thought-of Macy has specialized in playing eccentric or marginalized characters. He is currently starring in *Shameless*, a television series about a poor, dysfunctional family. “Seeking to explain how the series compares to other American shows about low-income families, [executive producer Paul Abbott] added: ‘It’s not ‘My Name is Earl’ or ‘Roseanne.’ It’s got a much graver level of poverty attached to it. It’s not blue collar; it’s no collar.’” (*New York Times*, December 2010)

But “leftism” in these circles is synonymous, not with opposition to “poverty” or to the capitalist elite, but with gender politics. Huffman joined the #MeToo campaign in 2017, accusing Harvey Weinstein of coercing her into wearing one of his wife Georgina Chapman’s fashion designs!

In January 2018, at the Golden Globes award ceremony, Macy explained to the media that his wife was “very involved with Time’s Up [the legal accompaniment to #MeToo] and I have two daughters. This is a good thing,” Macy insisted ... ‘Young folks are charged up politically, like they were when I was a kid. I’m an old hippie, and [my daughters and I] talk about nothing else.’”

The actor, according to ET Online, “revealed that Huffman hosted a ‘huge’ Time’s Up meeting at their house two nights ago. ‘It was a who’s who of Hollywood!’ exclaimed Macy, who was representing the initiative with a Time’s Up pin on the red carpet. ‘I couldn’t believe it.’”

Inevitably, given the credentials of individuals like Huffman and Macy, the right-wing media is attempting to whip up phony populist sentiment against Hollywood “liberals” and anti-Trump “elitists” over the college admissions scandal. A Fox Business pundit, for example, commented—absurdly—that in Hollywood, “they want big government and leftist group think to run the world. But, it’s interesting that when it comes to what is right for themselves, they choose a different path.”

However, as the AFP points out, ProPublica editor Daniel Golden has “documented how President Trump’s son-in-law Jared Kushner gained admission to Harvard University in 1998 after his father made a legal \$2.5 million donation to the school.”

The entire ruling elite, from right to “left,” has been further corrupted and transformed, shifted far to the right, by financial parasitism and social inequality. They will only be dislodged by the revolutionary efforts of the working class.

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